BACKGROUND PAPER NO. 6

THE METIS BETTERMENT ACT: HISTORY AND CURRENT STATUS

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INTRODUCTION

Metis Colonies (now Settlements) were established in the late 1930's in central and northern Alberta pursuant to The Metis Population Betterment Act. These Colonies were part of a comprehensive scheme to improve the general welfare of the Metis population of the Province. There currently exists eight (8) Metis Settlements that represent a very unique form of land tenure in Canada. The purpose of this paper is to provide a synopsis of the history of The Metis Betterment Act, consider the status of its review and provide an overview of the Settlements.

EWING COMMISSION

The phrase "the forgotten people" aptly describes the Metis people of Alberta in the 1930's. The Metis people were not allocated reserves as status Indians nor did they have 'squatters rights' on crown land. They were provided with land or money script but this initiative was not successful. The depression further diminished what opportunities existed for improving their economic conditions. The Metis, aware of their poor social and economic conditions and their lack of a land base, formed the L'Association des Metis d'Alberta et les Territoires du Nord-Ouest (1932) to lobby the provincial government to address their concerns. Several petitions were presented to the government amid growing expressions of sympathy for their cause by many prominent individuals.

The Alberta Legislature passed a resolution on February 27, 1933 that the government should make inquiry into and concerning the problems of health, education and the general welfare of the half-breed population. This resolution resulted in the establishment of the Ewing Commission (December 12, 1934) consisting of Alberta F. Ewing, Edward A. Braithwaite and James M. Douglas.

The Commissioners advertised and conducted meetings at major centres in central and northern Alberta. They solicited the views of not only the Metis people but others as well, including representatives of the clergy and medical professions. By"Metis" or 'Half-Breed' they meant a person of mixed blood, white or Indian, who lives the life of an ordinary Indian and includes a non-treaty Indian.

The Ewing Commission presented its report to the Alberta Legislature on February 15, 1936. The report described general conditions among the Metis as an 'unfortunate state of affairs.' For example, it was found that certain health aspects of the Metis could be improved. It was, therefore, recommended that a measure of medical attention as is reasonably possible should be given to Metis people.

The topic of education was also briefly investigated by the Commission. Apparently, the relative merits of boarding school were considered in view of the fact most Metis resided in areas without schools.

The Ewing Commission considered several factors before making their final recommendations on provision of Settlements for the Metis. First, temporary assistance to the Metis would not solve their problems, but rather a comprehensive scheme was required. Second, the Government was trying to curtail expenditures. Third, Metis should not be made wards of the government. They reasoned this would undermine his initiative, destroy his responsibility and prevent his ever becoming a self-supporting citizen. Finally, the Metis had offered their labour free of charge to construct houses, schools, etc. in any scheme that may be adopted.

The Commissioners further recognized that the traditional means of livelihood of the Metis -- hunting, fishing and trapping -- would not continue indefinitely as the supply of fur, fish and game were becoming scarce. However, the Metis could become self-supporting through agriculture and particularly stock raising. Therefore, the Commission recommended a comprehensive scheme involving the establishment of some sort of farm colony for the Metis as this would be the most cost-effective. The requirements of a farm colony included it having reasonably good agricultural land, and other lands for hunting, fishing and trapping close to a lake or lakes and having sufficient timber available for the construction of log buildings. Conditions were also specified for the allocation of land and its administration.

THE METIS POPULATION BETTERMENT ACT

The Legislative Assembly of Alberta enacted The Metis Population Betterment Act on November 22, 1938 for the betterment of the general welfare of the Metis population of the Province.

The Act was quite brief, but it is significant because for the first time the Metis became defined in legislation. The term "Metis" was defined in Sec. 2(a):

> A person of mixed white and Indian blood but does not include either an Indian or non-treaty Indian as defined in the Indian Act, being Chapter 98 of the Revised Statutes of Canada, 1927.

Other features of the act included authorizing a Minister of the Executive Council to promote the formation of Settlement associations of members of the Metis population who are unable to secure out of their own resources a reasonable standard of living. The Lieutenant Governor in Council could set aside suitable unoccupied crown lands for the settlement of the members of the associations and prescribe regulations governing administration of settlement matters.

Shortly after proclamation of The Metis Population Betterment Act, the Minister of Public Health was designated as its administrator. He formed a joint Metis-Government Committee to select appropriate areas as Metis colonies. This committee recommended twelve (12) possible sites as settlement areas. In the following years, eleven of these sites were set aside by order-in-council for the use of settlement association: Wolf Lake, Utikuma Lake, Cold Lake, Marlboro, Keg River, Big Prairie, Touchwood, Goodfish Lake, Elizabeth, Fishing Lake and East Prairie. However, the orders in council pertaining to Marlboro, Touchwood/Siebert, Wolf Lake and Cold Lake were eventually rescinded. At present there are eight Metis settlements.

A major revision of The Metis Population Betterment Act was made in 1940. The amended Act defined as Metis a person with not less than 1/4 Indian blood but who was neither an Indian nor a non-treaty Indian according to the Indian Act. The administrative authority of the Minister was increased to permit him to make regulations concerning buildings, timber, use of settlement lands, etc. Minor changes have been made to the act since this revision and it is now known as The Metis Betterment Act. A review of the Act began in 1982 by a joint Metis-Government Committee as a result of the recognition that it was outdated.

JOINT METIS-GOVERNMENT COMMITTEE TO REVIEW THE METIS BETTERMENT ACT AND REGULATIONS

A Joint Metis-Government Committee to review The Metis Betterment Act and regulations was established by order-in-council 422/82 on March 31, 1982. This Joint Committee was to act in an advisory capacity and in particular to make recommendations to the Minister of Municipal Affairs which would allow for political, social, cultural and economic development on Metis Settlements. The committee consisted of two representatives of the Metis Settlements, a member from the department of Municipal Affairs and a member of the Alberta Legislature. The chairman was former Lieutenant-Governor Dr. Grant MacEwan.

The Joint Committee reviewed background documentation pertaining to the settlements that included a detailed examination of the Metis Betterment Act and Regulations. Committee members visited the settlements and consulted with settlement association members.

They then explored possible options that would in effect be the basis of future discussions about draft legislation that would allow for political, cultural, social and economic development on Metis settlements.

The Committee submitted its report to the Minister of Municipal Affairs on July 12, 1984. It contained recommendations pertaining to self-government, security of land and in general local autonomy on the Metis Settlements. At the same time, the committee recognized that it "drew together many ideas, some of them conflicting, some of which require a great deal more discussion with the Metis settlements, and some of which need to be evaluated in terms of the government's position towards all Metis people in the Province both on and off the settlement." Consequently, the discussion paper is presently under review by the Alberta Government and Metis settlement associations.

OVERVIEW OF METIS SETTLEMENTS

A) DEMOGRAPHICS

Alberta's eight Metis Settlements are located in the central and northern areas of Alberta (see map, Appendix I). The acreage of the settlements as well as the population varies considerably as illustrated in the following chart:

Settlement	Acreage (Acres)	Population (1983)
Big Prairie	202,880	294
Caslan	86,400	655
East Prairie	80,640	336
Elizabeth	63,360	416
Fishing Lake	93,890	325
Gift Lake	207,360	482
Kikino	114,560	671
Paddle Prairie	403,200	644
Total:	1,252,290 acres	3,823

Source: Metis Development Branch: Alberta Municipal Affairs, 1984

B) ADMINISTRATION

i) Metis Development Branch

The Minister of Municipal Affairs is responsible for administration of The Metis Betterment Act. He is aided in his duties by the Metis Development Branch. Basically, the branch is responsible for administering the Metis Settlement Trust Fund, the provincial budget vote that provides assistance to Metis Settlements and for the delivery or brokering of government services to the Settlements.

ii) Settlement Councils

Settlement members elect five (5) councillors that act in an advisory capacity to the Minister concerning matters on the settlement. Councillors are paid an honorarium and reimbursed for expenses incurred when attending meetings. They work cooperatively with members of the Metis Development Branch to plan and implement projects and activities on the settlements. These projects are funded from a combination of Trust and Provincial funds.

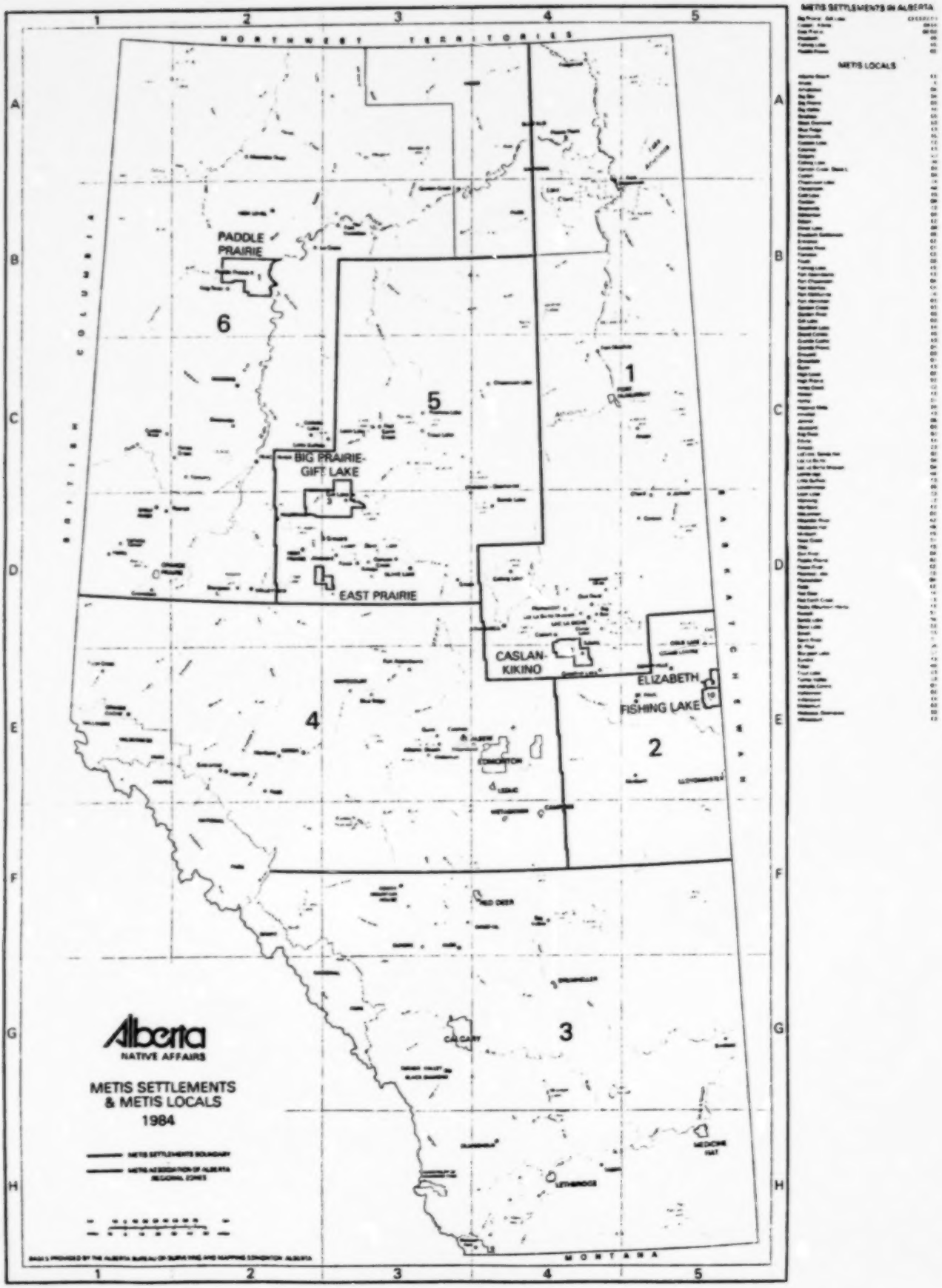
iii) Alberta Federation of Metis Settlements Associations

The Alberta Federation of Metis Settlements Association was incorporated under the Societies Act on May 28, 1975. Its aim is to co-ordinate, promote and represent the concerns of the settlements. Its executive consists of an elected president, three staff members and the chairman of each settlement council.

The Federation promotes the interests of settlement members through a wide range of activities. Its views on aboriginal rights have been expressed in the document, Metisism: A Canadian Identity. It has also coordinated the research and publishing of case histories of most of the Settlements.

iv) Settlement Sooniyaw

Settlement Sooniyaw Corporation is owned by the eight Metis Settlement associations. Its corporate purpose is to promote economic development on the settlements by creating business and employment opportunities. A recent initiative of the Corporation has been the establishment of a Metis Settlement Carpentry Training Program.


NORTHWEST TERRITORIES
PADDLE PRAIRIE
BIG PRAIRIE-GIFT LAKE
EAST PRAIRIE
CASLAN-KIKINO
ELIZABETH
FISHING LAKE
EDMONTON
CALGARY
LETHBRIDGE
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Alberta
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METIS SETTLEMENTS
& METIS LOCALS
1984
METIS SETTLEMENTS IN ALBERTA
METIS LOCALS